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Long Island Botanical Society Newsletter

In the Field with Roy Latham, #6

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Roy Latham (1881-1979) is widely recognized as one of Long Island's most prominent field naturalists. In 2023, Diana Latham donated her father's papers (including his *Journal*, correspondence, field notes, photographs, and more) to the Oysterponds Historical Society (OHS) in Orient, New York (see LIBS newsletter, 2024, vol. 34, no. 1). Since then, Roy's *Journal* (1902-1978) has been digitized and is now available on the OHS website. Additionally, an exhibit on Roy Latham is on display at OHS from June to the end of September 2025 (see announcement, page 7). The following excerpts from Roy's *Journal* have been lightly edited and the subtitles have been added by the authors.

Figure 1. Examples of Roy Latham's journals and field notebooks from the early 1900s. Courtesy of Oysterponds Historical Society.

Tornado at Orient

"For once in my life, I have experienced a genuine tornado at Orient. We had just sat down to the dinner table. It was in the center of hard, southerly, storm floods of rain and a gale of wind. There was a heavy rumbling to the southwest, in the direction of the Cedars, which we thought was thunder. The sky at the time lit up with the brightness of sunlight, then the wind struck the house with such force as to throw open the doors, the wind sweeping the dishes from the table and smashing them. In five minutes, it was passed. But what wreck and ruins lay behind that five minutes. Fine fruit trees in the yard were up-rooted or broken off at the ground, large limbs on the apple trees were twisted or wrenched asunder. The peach orchard was swept to the ground, nearly every tree broken off amid-way up. The wild cherry tree west of the barn was broken off at the top and the top was carried several hundred feet northeast across the plowed field, nearly to the triangle boundary of Wizel, C. H. Tuthill, and F. L. Latham. Doors were flung open, four large rolling doors were wrenched from their fastening and carried across the yard, some went south, others north or west or east. Wagons were rolled several hundred feet. The wheel and vane was bent on the windmill, corn and other small crops were leveled flat to the ground. It cut a patch about two hundred feet wide striking our place fair and square. And swept on to the home of R. R. Tuthill, where it demolished sheds and other out buildings, smashing wagons, ripping railing from the new house, up-rooting trees, and tearing off large branches. We went to the woods to see where it cut through. It evidently came through Peter's Neck and struck into the locust woods west of the Cedars. A path had been cut through them leveling the great locust, oaks, and hickory trees to the ground; and also cedars, many were up-rooted, others twisted and broken off at all heights. It is a sight to long be remembered." [*Journal*, September 21, 1915]

Nature-loving Indians

"As I sat on the old clam-breaking plot and pondered over the long years that have come and passed between us, I realized that I sat in a spot and gazed on the scenery that the red man loved, one spot in Orient that stands unchanged through any agency of pale face man. The autumn tinge of the marsh grass waving gently around the narrow head of placid Long Pond.

(continued on page 3)

Acknowledgement. The authors thank the Robins Island Foundation for a generous grant awarded to the Oysterponds Historical Society for assistance in curating the writings of Roy Latham.

Long Island Botanical Society

Founded: 1986 • Incorporated: 1989

The Long Island Botanical Society is dedicated to the promotion of field botany and a greater understanding of the plants that grow wild on Long Island, New York.

Visit the Society's Web site
www.libotanical.org

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Society News

LIBS 40-Year Anniversary Celebration

Please join the celebration of *40 years of LIBS*, at the historic Third House Nature Center in Montauk. The event is being planned for September 2026, but has not yet been finalized. Vicki Bustamante is involved with organizing the event and if you are interested in helping please contact Eric Lamont (elamont@optonline.net).

LIBS was founded in 1986 by a small group of Long Island botanists and naturalists who wanted to promote the study of the plants that grow wild on Long Island. One of the first goals of the society was to publish an atlas of the native and non-native vascular plants that spontaneously occur on Long Island, excluding cultivated plants. Work on the atlas has steadily continued over the last four decades and the final publication is in the process of being formatted for printing. Dot maps show the distribution of each of the more than 2,500 taxa, including species, hybrids, and additional infraspecific taxa. The atlas is being published by the Torrey Botanical Society in association with the Long Island Botanical Society. Copies will be available at the 40-year celebration event.

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LIBS Life Members. One way members support the society is by becoming a Life Member. Such support keeps the society vibrant and able to achieve its goals. Please show your support of LIBS by becoming a Life Member. Current Life Members of LIBS:

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(Roy Latham, continued from page 1)

The dwarf cedars rooted firmly on the sandy ridge beyond. Far to the east, the northerly breeze ripples the pond, black ducks float on its bosom. And the gull hovering above the beach that divides the entire pond from the outer bay. The nasal call of the red-breasted nuthatch, and the chip of the myrtles in the wind break of cedars, and groundsels at my back. All these things the nature-loving Indian of long ago must have seen and loved as my own heart does. I dreamed plenty of one glimpse into those rare days. No doubt, along with the shell fish repast were feasts of wild fowl and favorite fishes." [*Journal*, October 22, 1916]

Night Sky

"A very splendid Aurora Borealis last evening, equal to moonlight." [*Journal*, March 7, 1918]

Nature's Weather Forecasters

"The little aphodius dung beetles are swarming today, a sure sign that the wind will be east tomorrow." [*Journal*, April 17, 1918]

"Cloudy, heavy rain, wind east, temperature 36 to 14 degrees. Cold, raw easterly wind - the dung beetles did their work." [*Journal*, April 18, 1918]

Stop the Bounty on Crows

"I examined a single dropping of a crow on the seat of a boat at the bay today. It contained the following: 39 pits of the wild black cherry; 4 shells of the little, salt marsh snail; 15 remains of the red-legged grasshopper; one small beetle of the bark inhabiting species. The large number of grasshoppers is interesting since this species is more abundant then in a number of years. If all the crows of the one flock, containing upward of a 100 birds, equals this number of insects, say each day would mean 1,500 grasshoppers a day, or 45,000 per month in August. It is safe to assume that each crow doubles this number of hoppers in addition to army worms and miscellaneous insects. The wild black cherry, although used to certain extent by the human race, is a natural wild food of birds and cannot properly be classed against the crow as injurious marks. The salt marsh snail is absolutely of no economic importance. Therefore, practically all the injurious extant of the crow in August is that of wild fruits. The writer suggests that the crow be not persecuted during the month of August or at any season when it is not actually committing damage to farm crops, young birds, or otherwise. In other words, it is more scientific to practice some method to retard their depredations rather than to kill them – in as much the bird may be balancing his evil by his good - the insects he destroys may double, often triple the damage the crow would have done directly. Especially should no crows be disturbed during an outbreak of army worms, grasshoppers, or June beetles. The paying of bounty on the life of the crow as rendered by the Orient Gun Club is thoroughly wrong, at least where it applies to all the year. It is like fumbling on a job in the dark - and disregarding a light. Some crows are singularly mischievous, invading chickenries repeatedly and such examples should be checked by any means. Other serious charges should be tolerated to a proper degree. Corn, as in recent years, that is left out in husks half or all winter is only an invitation to a satisfying larder and should not be charged severely against the crow, while rats and mice without any valuable traits are destroying ninety per cent more grain and fodder within the same husks. If real figures could be fairly given, they would adjust the damage of the crows compared to that of the insects, the same birds consume throughout a full year." [*Journal*, September 4, 1919]

A Gentle, Snapping Sound

"While I was in a dry open place, where there were only a few trees, I was interested in hearing a light snapping or crackling noise in the dry leaves. I was trying to connect the sound with insects moving the dry leaves that had thickly fallen the past few days in the high wind. Finally, I noticed that the dead brown stems of the partridge peas were springing back with every snap. A closer view showed that the pods were bursting open, causing the snapping. It was extremely interesting and I studied it for some time. It was heard on every side exactly as though a lot of beetles were at work in the leaves. For a short space there would be none heard, but not more than a few seconds with none heard. Then, two or a dozen perhaps would explode in union, then one here, one there, on all sides of me for a distance of fifty to one hundred feet on every side. The dark brown seeds were on an average six to the pod, and were ejected for several feet in different directions. About four feet was the usual distance they wore thrown - but many were thrown to six feet, striking against dry oak leaves with surprising force. They were sometimes thrown in four directions from one pod, but commonly only in two ways from the sides, as the tip of the pod would curl, holding back seed from the apex. This was at midday in a bright sun on a sheltered hillside, no wind, after days of cold, strong, north gales. I was there near an hour and the rattle and snap of the busting pods and flying seeds were in action all the while I was there." [*Journal*, November 9, 1918]

Shark Attack

"128 adult spiny dogfish [shark family] caught in one trap is a record for several years. Nearly all are females. The fishermen dread these fish, as they gnaw the seine nets badly with their teeth. Mr. Dan Rogers of Greenport, a man about 80 years of age, tells a truthful experience about these fish when he was in the cod fishery business off the Banks nearly 50 years ago. A man fell overboard with a heavy overcoat on and was

(continued on page 4)

(Roy Latham continued from page 3)

immediately attacked by a number, a whole school of those sharks. Although assistance was gotten to the man as soon as possible, the coat was nearly ripped from his body, and he was badly bitten in several places. This is from a man whose word cannot be doubted." [*Journal*, November 12, 1918]

Iceberg in Gardiners Bay

"I drove to Long Beach to take a photograph of the iceberg which is grounded just north of Bens Point and about two hundred yards off ashore. The berg is about 200 feet in length by approximately 50 feet wide and stands about 10 to 15 feet above the water; it probably is stuck to the bottom where the water is about 15 to 20 feet deep. There is mostly open water in that part of Gardiner's Bay, although early in the week the keeper in the Orient Point Lighthouse walked ashore to Orient on the ice, the first time it is said since 1905." [*Journal*, March 2, 1934]

A Long Life

"Today is my birthday, 60 years past and gone, 40 more to go!" [*Journal*, May 23, 1941]

Spring Flight of Red-tailed Hawks

"Saw 24 red-tailed hawks in flight during the day, all going west and flying low. First, there were five together, the most I ever saw together at one time here; at 10am, ones and twos came, and after that mostly ones, about 1/2 hour or less apart, and then four together at about 1pm. After that none were seen for an hour when one came over at about 2pm, the last seen for the day. All of these came directly over the bay from Gardiner's Island. All stopped to rest for 10 to 15 minutes in the first woods reached, and then continued on westward - all apparently were hunting as they moved on, which evidently was the reason for the low flight. It was the ideal weather condition for this bird's flight. Clear, except for smoky haze on the air, a fresh west wind with temperature in the middle 50s. It is now certain that these hawks migrate east along the south side of the island, cross to Gardiners Island and then to Orient, instead of through the island northerly to New England. The time from 10am to early afternoon, the period when nearly all of this species passed through Orient, would indicate that the birds probably were still flying east on the south side in the early morning. As it would seem that if they had passed the night on Gardiners they would arrive in Orient much earlier in the morning. This is by far the largest number of red-tails I have ever seen in Orient in a day, three being the most for one day in the spring flight before. Perhaps the army activities in and around Montauk may be the cause of the great numbers, where before they may have lingered about the Montauk vicinity for a few days and drifted west in fewer numbers each day." [*Journal*, March 26, 1943]

The Big Freeze

"Mostly clear, wind strong, northwest, temperature 10 below zero to 0. The coldest day on record for Orient. The coldest minimum, the coldest maximum, and the coldest average temperature we have ever recorded." [*Journal*, February 5, 1918]

"Went across the bay to Long Beach and around the country to see how the lay of the land was after the big freeze. Ice on the bay is very rough and ranging from 8 to 14 or more inches thick. Loose ice in Gardiner's Bay, Sound solidly blocked with heavy white cakes of ice. An auto crossed the ice from Eagle's Neck to Long Beach this morning. This is something that has never been done at that treacherous spot before in the history of the place. And there is no record of a team of wagon ever crossing there on the ice, as it rarely even skims over. Another auto drove from Greenport to Orient on the ice to eel on the bay and then drove back on the ice. Future generations will remember this record." [*Journal*, January 6, 1918]

"Sound, bays, and all waterways are solidly blocked with ice. It is a natural bridge between Greenport and Shelter Island - strings of wagons, autos, and sleighs are passing continually. The ice on Greenport Harbor is more than two feet thick and when digging a grave in willow hill cemetery the frost was found to be 42 inches deep in the earth." [*Journal*, February 6, 1918]

Two World Wars

"All men from 13 to 45, except those that registered in former draft, registered today. I am 37 and look ahead as in sort of delight in seeing the fray and getting a whack at the Huns." [*Journal*, September 12, 1918]

"It is a beautiful moonlight night. An unusual large fleet of war vessels are off on the bay; 10 destroyers, one battle cruiser, and two gunboats. It is very beautiful in the evening when other lights are playing." [*Journal*, September 22, 1915]

"The great news that the war is ended, and the wings of peace are again hovering over the land, came ringing through soon after noon today, while I was in Greenport bells rang and whistles screeched, shipyards and other places closed, and a parade was started lasting most of the afternoon and another into the evening. We can hardly realize it even yet and the feeling uppermost in the thought is it is done rightly. I miss the friendly search-light on the fort at Plum Island that has lit up the yard and country around home like moonlight on the darkest nights for 20 months, it is tonight dark and quiet like in the days before the war." [*Journal*, November 7, 1918]

Figure 2. Map of Orient Point (eastern tip of Long Island's North Fork), showing the location of Roy Latham's farm and other localities mentioned in Roy's Journal. North is at the top. Map prepared by John Holzapfel, 2025.

"All the parades and great racket yesterday was a false report, for the war is still on, although the armistice is expected to be signed at any time. Some of the neighbors with their great show of flags felt like fools today. I stayed at home, for the war did not end to my complete satisfaction." [*Journal*, November 8, 1918]

"At last the war is over. The news that the Kaiser has flown to Holland and the peace terms signed this morning at 6 o'clock brought out another great parade this afternoon in Greenport at 2:30. It was a mile in length, led by the Home Guard, civilian fire companies, school children, and concluded by the wee tots of the Kindergarten. It is a beautiful evening just at dark, not a breath of air is astir, Nature is calmly reposed as peace has the whole world again wrapped in its mighty arms. The war is ended and I am jubilant with the rest that the bloody business is over, although deeply regret that I did not get into it." [*Journal*, November 11, 1918]

"Blackout at night first for Suffolk County; 7:05 minutes after seven and for hours after." [*Journal*, October 14, 1941]

"Men spies?? taken on Long Beach." [*Journal*, July 3, 1942]

"Army men shot one of Peter Brown's cows on Sound beach at night - no one is allowed on beaches after dark." [*Journal*, July 9, 1942]

Long Island's Last Stand of Native Red Spruce

[Author's Note: Red spruce (*Picea rubens*) is a conifer of northern latitudes and high altitudes. As the last glaciers retreated from Long Island, tundra vegetation first colonized the island, followed by northern coniferous forest. The colony of red spruce discovered by Roy Latham on Gid's Island, Orient Point is considered the last remnant of this ancient coniferous forest on Long Island.]

"In a small plot of woods somewhat removed from the everyday haunts of men, I came up on four large Red Spruce trees. I had never visited those woods before. Two of the Spruces were splendid specimens, 40 feet tall, 16 inches in diameter at the ground, and also 10 feet up." [*Journal*, June 20, 1909]

"The four large Red Spruce trees in Gid's Island woods helps to make this one of the most interesting bits of wild woodland in Orient. They are a true native on Long Island and the only spruce trees known to occur on the island, and I am glad to have the honor of first discovering them. When Norman Taylor came down to see the record a few years ago, Dr. Britton laughed at him and said he did not believe they were here, so that's all there was about it. One of the old trees is dead and two are nearly dead; the fourth, a fine specimen, is beginning to die around the lower parts. I was most pleased

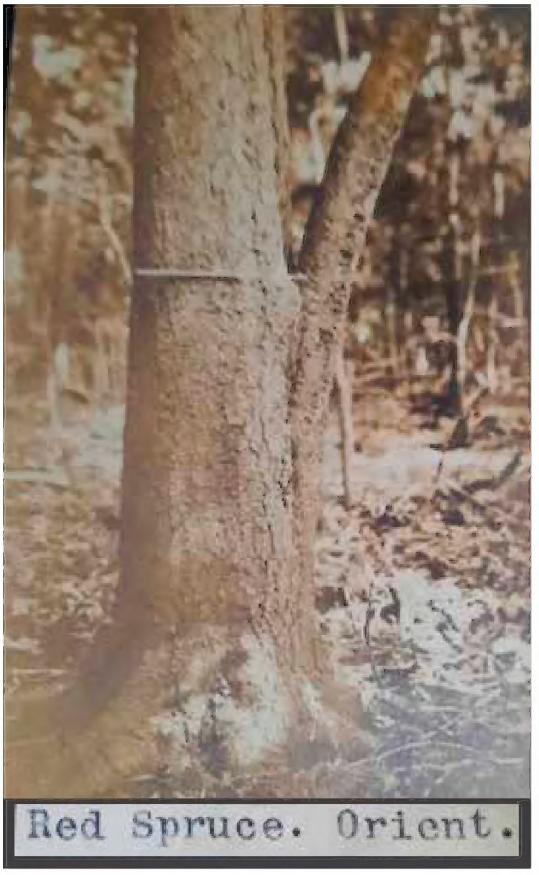
(continued on page 6)

(Roy Latham continued from page 5)

to find four young seedlings from 4 to 8 inches high in same woods, the largest one a lovely little fellow with bright glossy green foliage." [*Journal*, April 29, 1917]

"Norman Taylor and Dr. Gager from the Brooklyn Botanic Garden came out to Orient last night and today in the afternoon went to the Red Spruce station on Gid's Island. Taylor says this is the most interesting thing in the plant life on Long Island. Of the four old trees, two are dead, and the other two nearly dead, but the top of the one tree that I climbed was covered with large green cones. The four young seedlings are 10 to 22 inches in height and from 12 to 17 years old. This tree is a relic of the conifer forest that once covered this island and is the last of its race left. It seems to be running a losing fight." [*Journal*, July 24, 1920]

"The sun-of-a-gun Wilcox and his crowd of mosquito workers have let a fire go through Gid's Island and every one of the Red Spruce seedlings have burned to a crisp. This is a crime, and their end is a sad one. If the fire had been an accident it would be different, but when deliberately set on the marsh and no attempt made to check it going through the woods is a stain on the rights of life and a sin against science." [*Journal*, May 16, 1922]



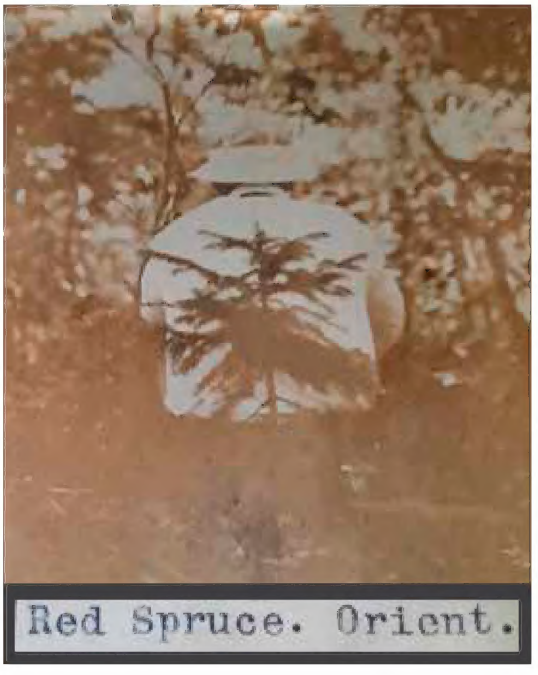


Figure 3. Red spruce (*Picea rubens*) on Gid's Island, Orient Point. Left and above: mature trees, each approximately 40 feet tall with a circumference of 16 inches; below: seedling, "with bright, glossy green foliage." Photos by Roy Latham, 1919; courtesy of Oysterponds Historical Society.

Hurricane of '38

"September 21, Wednesday. Cloudy, very heavy rain all last night and early this morning. Strong south wind in morning, shifting gradually to eastward, increasing in the afternoon with more heavy rain in afternoon. Temperature 70 to 74. Wind reached hurricane force by 2pm with heavy, driving rain falling. Wind was east by 2:30 and continued at greatest force from 2:30 to 4pm when the wind veered back to southwest gradually with diminishing power, and had reached southwest by 5pm and west soon after. The temperature reached its highest point at dark. First trees went down about 3pm (as Mae came from village with children) soon followed by the two old pear trees south of the old house, crab apple tree, and all together 36 trees in the yards. Roof went off of Harry's house, chimney off Fred's kitchen and off sprout house, then the barn and connected shed went down, crushing over the tractors and other gear underneath. Then the salt water started rolling up over the farm until it was at the foundation of this house and to the hydrant on the west side and past on the east side to the first cross road on C. H. Tuthill's farm. It was two feet deep in the garden and up to the road in front of the old house. All but a small northwest corner of the farm, south of the house, was under the water. Many Sharp-tailed Sparrows and a few Pectoral Sandpipers were washed up in the trash at the edge of the tide limits." [*Journal*, September 21, 1938]

"September 22, Thursday. Clear, fine day; fresh NW wind; temperature 64 to 65. Started getting barn clear of tractors and machinery; took pictures of wreckage on place. Mae went on road to village to see how things are progressing. Harry went to Greenport to get paper for his roof. Trees, buildings, and everything down along the line, both churches lost steeples and bells. All windmills but three in Orient disabled, ours one of the three standing. O. D. Petty's old barn gone; Lou Tuthill's chimney down, Witzel's cauliflower house gone, and so the story all along. Belfry on point school off. Salt water came to road from south side from Dan Tuthill's old corner house to point. Dan Latham had every acre under water, also Harold Latham and most of several others. Both Orient docks gone. Oscar Bebee's old barn gone, and all sheds, and his house roof; Ryders - Moses Terry's old barn gone and the roof of the house. Most of telephone and lighting co. poles down - no service since the hurricane struck. It will be weeks before they are on again. Roy Young's house at point beach is now in the middle of Howard Latham's pond. Road gone to Long Beach park, water came over all the beach there. Boats of all kinds spread all along the shore and on the farms, we have four row boats in the-sprout fields; Ryders motor boat on top of the high dike of F. L. Terry's which Sandford built last winter. The west side of Duvalle's on Eagle Neck was entirely washed away. He had 1200 bags of cukes washed away, mostly on Irving Latham's farm and east. Harry's barometer went down to 28.2, wind is said to have reached 110 miles an hour." [*Journal*, September 22, 1938]

Roy Latham Exhibit

Oysterponds Historical Society, Orient, NY

(summer and fall 2025)

The Oysterponds Historical Society has dedicated two exhibit rooms to the story of Roy Latham and his recently obtained unpublished *Journal* (1902-1978). For more information go online to: oysterpondshistoricalsociety.org.

Long Island Botanical Society
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Field Trips

September 27, 2025 (Saturday) 10am–4pm
Montauk Point State Park, Suffolk Co.
Trip Leader: Vicki Bustamante
Joint trip with the New York Flora Association

Tides permitting, we will first look for signs off the point of the ancient "Ghost Forest" and the 4,700 year old Atlantic White Cedar stumps and remnant peat bog. We will then botanize a few small coastal plain ponds, and then continue on to a coastal salt pond (Oyster Pond) while passing through maritime dunes, beach, shrubland, and woodlands. Hike will be 5 miles or so but easy walking; we will be navigating through some wet areas, puddles, and shoreline. About a dozen NYS-listed rare species are expected to be seen along with other noteworthy plants of the Atlantic coastal plain. Bring water, lunch, and tick protection.

Register online at the New York Flora Association website (montauk@nyflora.org) and additional details regarding the trip will be sent in your confirmation email. Field trip is limited to 20 participants.

Saturday, December 6, 2025, 11am
Walking Dunes Hike
Hither Hills State Park, Montauk, Suffolk Co.
Trip Leader: Vicki Bustamante
Joint trip with the Third House Nature Center and the North Shore Land Alliance

Walk the Walking Dunes at Hither Hills State Park, Montauk. These unique 80 foot high parabolic dunes, created by strong northwesterly shifting winds, are slowly marching southeastward covering all in their path. Passing through a maritime pitch pine woodland we will see signs of the phantom forest, with its twisted oaks and crooked pitch pines. Cradled in the dunes are bogs which are host to many rare and unusual plants. The brackish meadows and interdunal swales shelter many interesting botanical treats which we will be sure to highlight.

Register online with the North Shore Land Alliance (northshorelandalliance.org). After you have registered, but before the event, we will email you to confirm your attendance and provide more detailed information.